

Between Life History and Performance: Sundari Devi and the Art of Allusion

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Introduction

Since 1993, I've returned periodically to the field notes, photos, and videos generated by seven months of research that year with *nacnīs* (NUCH-nee) and former *nacnīs*, women who sing and dance professionally in rural areas of the states of Jharkhand, West Bengal and Orissa in east-central India. Materials from that research and subsequent visits in 2006 and 2007 have generated an on-going stream of inquiry into the interpretation of gender, performance, and life history in which I have tried out a number of approaches: interpretive models (1994a, 1994b); experience-, theme-, and theory-driven interpretations (1997, 2004, 2005b); and life history analysis (1993, 2005a). All, of course, have produced only partial understandings; in fact, coming to terms with the partiality of each approach has generated the next. Here I offer a new approach, a new model for intersubjective interpretation that cuts across the life history narratives and song and dance performances of a former *nacnī* I am calling, to protect her privacy, Sundari Devi. My interpretation follows her own heteroglossic and allusive interpretive strategies as they emerged over the course of many interviews and contingencies, guiding me to some fresh insights into the art of interpretation.

Along the way, I have been engaged by a tension that marks much of the scholarly interpretation of women's lives, the tension between the generic and the particular. It has given rise to a nice collection of dichotomies—culture and the individual; the conventional and the exceptional; norms and transgressions; frames and performative emergences; theory and experience; coherence and multiplicity; essentialism and constructionism—but they boil down to the same model (e.g., Diamond 2000; Abu-Lughod 1990:13). Feminists, especially, have been

torn between generalizations, which can translate easily into action, and the specific multiplicity of identifications that, according to some, characterizes women's way of being in the world (e.g., Bartky 1995; Visweswaran 1994; Alcoff 1988). I can sum up my own dilemma with a single question: what is the larger purpose of voyeuristically scrutinizing the particulars of a woman's life or, perhaps worse, scrutinizing myself scrutinizing a woman's life?

I felt this tension every time I returned to a fascinating, revealing series of interviews with Sundari Devi, now a middle-aged star of staged song performances in Jharkhand. She was once a *nacnī*, and all of the generalizations I can make about them have applied to her as well, some even after she left the profession (see below). But she also resists those generalizations to an even greater degree than did the other six *nacnīs* I interviewed. So the interpretive trope of "multiplicity" may seem an appropriate choice. It has certainly been productive for other scholars seeking to understand individuals in India who have been marginalized by caste (Racine and Racine 2004), by gender (Gold 1991, 1994), by artistic avocation (Seizer 2005; Wulff 1986), or, in the case of professional female singers and dancers, by some combination of these (Maciszewski 2001a, 2001b; Qureshi 2001; Rao 1996; Babiracki 1994b).¹ As A. K. Ramanujan once noted, an "Indian way of thinking" itself is fundamentally relative and contextual and therefore given to fluidity, changeability, and multiplicity (1989). Moreover, we can understand the organization of music of all kinds in the sub-continent through this lens.

The profound heteroglossia of Sundari Devi's narratives and performances—a kaleidoscope of languages, genres, models, metaphors, and mirrors—and the dramatic events of her life reflect a similar multiplicity of positions, roles, and affiliations, all of which have often appeared paradoxical. But Sundari has been a friend for some twenty-three years now, and in her presence I've never understood her as a conflicted or fragmented individual, either before or after our interviews. She projects a strong, coherent sense of herself as a person, despite her thoroughly unique and nomadic life. Although I have always been aware of her marginal social status, I have never thought of her as an "untouchable" or "outcaste," and in the present essay I prefer not to mine her interviews for such "social processes" and "cultural accretions," although that is still the predominant approach to narrating lives of villagers in India (see Arnold and Blackburn 2004:1–28). The constant in Sundari's life since childhood, and in my own experience of her, has been performance, her singing and (rarely now) dancing.

It may be counter-intuitive to seek coherence, as I do in this article, not simply in the texts and generic norms of performance, but also

in its ephemeral, transient, and particularized flow. This may be why scholars writing the lives of performers have so seldom studied them in the course of performance. The few who have broached the subject include Maciszewski (2006), Seizer (2005), Vander (1988), and Frisbie and McAllester (1978), although none in the transparently intersubjective way that I propose here. In Sundari's case, her creative exploitation of performance strategies across discourses of speech, song, and dance is precisely what grounds my understanding of her as a whole individual. She seems to enjoy playing to her audience; mixing models, metaphors, and genres; and exploiting surprise, masquerade, and oblique allusion.

So, as apt as the idea of contending multiplicities may be, the present article is an attempt to understand Sundari Devi as I know her, as more than a fragmented, conflicted postmodern subject caught between forces of change and multiple selves. True, in the course of our interviews, her continually changing self-representations and her fleeting, indirect allusions seemed unsettling, even a little shifty at times. After our first couple interviews with her, my research assistant, Mukund Nayak, and I discussed endlessly whether or not she was telling us "the truth." As I've recently reconsidered her life history narratives and performances, though, in their respective contexts of time, place, and audience, and especially relative to each other, they have begun to cohere in my mind around a more singular and satisfying understanding, that of Sundari as a skillful, creative interpreter herself.

In this essay I interpretively reconnect Sundari's oral life history narratives with the song and dance performances that she presented in the course of our interviews to interpret her life narratives as performances and her performances as life history. I considered calling this a snapshot of Sundari's life in 1993 (it has changed dramatically since), but it is really more of a clip from the moving picture of my research.

Nacnīs

Sundari was one of seven women, *nacnīs* and former *nacnīs*, whom I interviewed and videotaped in 1993.² I had known her longer than the others, having shared a stage with her in night-long, Nagpuri song programs back in 1984. Sundari sang songs in the local Nagpuri language and musical style, and I played local songs on bamboo flute. I began that 1993 research with the hopes of coming to know *nacnīs* as individuals, in the spirit of the long tradition of Euro-American biography and autobiography. Feminist scholars in the 1980s and 1990s also sought to penetrate "lives . . . shrouded in great secrecy" (Nanda 1990:xxi) and to know women's inner "feelings" and "dreams" (Shostak

1981:5). Scholars studying marginal individuals and “courtesans” in India had begun “unveiling the covered, listening to the muted, looking for hidden meanings” (N. Kumar 1994:2) or “recapturing a disappearing world” (Marglin 1985:12). Interestingly, the men associated with nācnīs in Jharkhand regularly indulge in this same fantasy, to discover the “truth” or “reality” about these women. My field research disabused me of all such objectives early on. Like courtesans the world over, nācnīs make an art of frustrating efforts to “know” them. Their desire to conceal in order to mitigate their triple social stigma (women, born “low-caste,” now “out-caste”) is certainly understandable, but these women actually seem to artfully cultivate the discourse of mystery that constitutes their performance culture in Jharkhand.

Among the few certainties, the generalizations, that I have about nācnīs is that the word, derived from the Indic *nācnā* (to dance), refers to the name of the event in which they perform, a nācnī dance, and to their performance and social roles; they *are* nācnīs. Their numbers in Jharkhand itself are unknown and certainly declining, but twenty to thirty is a good guess.³ All are originally from castes in which young women sing and dance collectively in public: predominantly Ghasi (fishermen, drummers, musicians), Lohara (blacksmiths), and Gorait/Mahali (drummers, musicians). All of the women I interviewed had been further alienated or abandoned in some way as young women prior to becoming “public dancers,” as normative society calls them. They had chosen love relationships with men (married and unmarried) rather than socially sanctioned (*samājik*) marriages, they had left unhappy marriages, or they had been abandoned by their husbands. According to Sundari Devi, she was kidnapped, drugged, and raped into the profession after being abandoned by her “social” husband, who took their daughter with him when he left. Once a nācnī, a woman becomes officially “outside caste” (*jāti bābar*) to her birth community. She is not expected to perpetuate family and lineage by bearing children, although most nācnīs do, nor does she have the protection and stability of an extended family and caste community.

After her recruitment, the young woman receives training in nācnī songs, drumming, and dance from a senior male musician from a more dominant (“higher”) caste. He may also be her “keeper” (*rakbnewālā*) or unofficial “husband” (*pati*) or “man” (*ādmī*), as the nācnī herself calls him. In the course of her life she may live with many “husbands” sequentially for varying amounts of time, changing her residence each time in an exceptionally nomadic life. As nācnīs age, the best—or luckiest—will garner enough power to choose their own “husbands” and negotiate their own domestic and performance relationships. The most clever can even

accumulate some wealth and property. Although it is tempting to liken the nācnī to the *tawā'if*, *ganikā*, and *bāī* (the courtesans of large northern Indian courts and salons), or to the *devadāsī* (the female temple servant/performer), a nācnī has no hereditary family or patriarchal community of support and protection as do the others.⁴ She has only her current “keeper” and his family, her admirers and supporters, and her own wits. Nācnīs may perform together at large events, but they are always in competition with one another to some extent. During my 1993 field research, it was only after I made it clear that I wasn't there to learn to perform as a nācnī that the women trusted me enough to speak to me.

Just as a nācnī never lives alone, she never dances alone, which is what distinguishes her dance performance from another, more classicized solo female dance of the region called *bāī nāc* (bāī dance). Bāī performance is also regarded differently, as pure entertainment with no necessary connection to ritual and celebratory community life. Typically, neither nācnīs nor bāīs perform in their own villages, instead maintaining there the illusion of a proper domestic life. In the eastern nācnī style of Jharkhand (Pancpargania-speaking areas), a nācnī sings and dances outdoors in makeshift, circular arenas (*akbrā*, also *akbrā*)⁵ surrounded by the audience, with a male partner (often her “husband”) to the accompaniment of *dhulkī* and *nagarā* drummers who move around the arena with her. The *dhulkī*, a double-headed barrel drum played with a hand and a stick, leads the ensemble. The pattern of its bass (stick) head is echoed on the *nagarā*, a large, iron-bodied kettledrum played with a set of thick sticks. The two dancers are colorfully dressed as the musician-god Krishna and his consort and ideal devotee, Radha. In the western (Nagpuri-speaking) style, one or more nācnīs dance outdoors with *dhulkī* and *nagarā* drummers before a line of singing and dancing village men, with relatively more freedom over their own movements. Though western-style dancers are not iconically costumed as Radha, the implication is still there; each is a Radha among many Krishnas. Nācnīs of both styles perform at weddings, annual celebrations of Radha and Krishna, and night-long entertainments, particularly during the spring and the hot months of March to June. For twenty years, Sundari Devi was a performer in the Nagpuri style.

Beyond these shared characteristics, nācnīs have proven very difficult to know, as any individual or group would be. More than this, though, the paradoxes that surround them are important constituents of the nācnī tradition. Each nācnī is simultaneously a scorned “public dancer,” a “kept” woman (*rakbni*), the goddess Radha herself, and an intensely private village wife. She lives with a man of higher caste status who is her “husband,” “keeper,” manager, and performance partner but who

typically will not take water or food from her because of her "lower," "impure" social and religious status. She is hyper female ("super female," as my research assistant Mukund Nayak put it), but is also the master of men's songs and drumming repertoires, conversation, and habits such as smoking and drinking. And by virtue of being officially "outside" society (*jāti bāhar*), she is thought to possess an insider's knowledge of romantic love, devotion, and music (see Babiracki 2004). Of course, all such paradoxes are consistent with the Hindu Vaisnava theology that sanctions *nacnīs'* unorthodox life-style (see Wulff 1996). *Nacnīs* move in and out of this discursive play of paradox throughout the course of their lives and to varying degrees exploit the advantage of knowing all sides.

Life, Ethnographically Speaking

Ethnographic life history research, particularly in the context of feminist approaches that seek to re-center women as subjects with authoritative voices, offers rich potential for understanding, but it is not without drawbacks. Among the benefits is the opportunity to give authority and agency to our research subjects and their particular experiences, to confront values and problematize the unbalanced power relations between researchers and subjects, and to expose the humanity of our understandings (Diamond 2000:99–100). My immersion into the particularities of *nacnīs'* lives also discouraged my initial impulse to understand them *as nacnīs* or courtesans, preformed, consistent representatives of a class of women, in effect reproducing their marginality. Particularities can compel us to question received interpretive paradigms.

Such worthy objectives can also trap ethnographers in a number of binds, or "fictions," as Kamala Visweswaran has called them (1994). She argues, for example, that appeals to the particularities of an individual's experience may actually block social action as we script autonomous lives disconnected from larger social and political issues, a persistent issue for me in writing Sundari's life history (see also Diamond 2000:103). Furthermore, in our desire as scholars to grant our subjects authority and restore their lost voices, we may find ourselves obscuring our own interpretive interventions in the production of ostensibly stable autobiographies, re-inscribing a "humanist holism" that Visweswaran has called "the essential fiction of ethnography" (1994:81; see also Blackburn 2004:205). In other words, to privilege our subjects' voices, we scholars often dissemble our own, representing ourselves as mere recorders, paraphrasers, or conduits for women's words, even as we direct readers' understandings through our selection, ordering, framing and contextualizing

operations (for examples, see Vander 1988; Nanda 1990; Abu-Lughod 1993; Maciszewski 2001a). This has the effect of making the production of life history more opaque, not less (for references to this critique see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1989; Lal 1996:200–201; Wolf 1996:25, 34–35). As Visweswaran has put it, feminists have been caught in a bind between "the supposition that we can give voice and the knowledge that we can never fully" (1994:100). Self-reflexivity and dialogism have proven to be equally problematic alternatives; the former simply "gives voice to the already speaking author" (Lal 1996:200), and the latter can obscure power imbalances between researcher and subject, and reduce "realities" to "mere fictions" (Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan quoted in Visweswaran 1994:80–81). Inevitably, the intersubjective process of interpreting life history distances everyone involved from any single authentic experience or autonomous voice.

The pretense of authoritative and mono-vocal "autobiographies" notwithstanding, for *nacnīs* and the rest of us, the stories we tell about ourselves are webs of truths, spun this way or that depending upon place and time, where we are in our lives, to whom we're talking, and in what medium we choose to tell our stories. And when we scholars retell the stories of others, we weave interpretation into interpretation in an active, dialogic dance that is impossible to unwind fully after the fact. In the account of Sundari Devi that follows, I share an intertwined ensemble of interpretations (mine, Sundari Devi's, Mukund Nayak's) as they emerged and shifted in response to our research encounters, as transient and fluid as performance itself. There are other interpretations in circulation in Jharkhand. For example, some musicians from the castes from which *nacnīs* are recruited regard them as helpless victims of circumstances, but nevertheless untrustworthy and deceptive. I aim to make the contingencies of our interpretations transparent without forcing the resolution of contradictions and interpretive conflicts. I aim to understand Sundari's life history narratives as performances and her song performances as life history without undermining the integrity and authority of either.

Searching for Signs of Musical Life

In writing the musical lives of musicians of Europe or North America or of classical musicians in India, we typically look at their individual musical contributions, their compositions and arrangements, scores and recordings, improvisations, sketches and diaries, the words of their students, or perhaps the reports and reviews of their performances. But where does one look in the case of Indian village performers such as

nacnīs? The songs nacnīs sing are in traditional, flexible melody-types transmitted orally through many generations and explicitly marked as male: Nagpuri *mārdanā jhumar* (men's jhumar) and Pancpargania or Bangla *jhumar* (jhumar, from the verb *jhumnā*, to sway, to play, to "groove"). Men compose the texts they sing, most of which consist of familiar tropes concerning the love-play between the god Krishna and his consort Radha through Radha's voice and sentiments. Although every nacnī I spoke with claimed some agency in creating or teaching their songs and dances, the men associated with them consistently claimed credit for every aspect of nacnī performance. I have yet to find a single song text attributed to or definitively composed by a nacnī. Moreover, in a formal, public akhrā performance, the male dancers and musicians run the show; a nacnī has little control over what she sings or where and how she moves around the space. In the eastern style, a nacnī follows her male partner ("Krishna") shadowing his movements. In the western style, as the nacnī dances in front of a line of men, she is still expected to match her movements to theirs and to the drumming cycle (*tāl*). In both styles, her breaks with formality are subtle, perhaps lagging behind her partner, making eye contact with someone in the audience, or flashing a sexy, toothy smile as she sings of her sorrow and longing for Krishna.

Informal conversations, rehearsals, taping sessions, and social gatherings offered nacnīs more room to shine artistically; to slip out of expectations, control audiences, choose their own songs, subvert or disagree with men; and to speak indirectly of matters they couldn't or wouldn't publicly voice. My interpretations of nacnīs were shaped most by these moments when they spoke, sang, or danced outside the lines, producing relatively more disruptive, mimetic excess (Kozel 1997), making these moments a good place to look for a life in performance rather than simply a "self-in-society" (Blackburn 2004:19).

As I've noted elsewhere (Babiracki 2004) in my interviews with Sundari there was always an audience of some sort listening in, not least of which were me and the audio or video recorder. "Public" and "private" performance spaces and the degrees of excess that they accommodated were relative. Nacnīs also spoke differently with family or men around, and men were always around unless I made special arrangements. My research assistant, Mukund Nayak, was usually around as well. He is one of Jharkhand's best and most popular stage singers, a Nagpuri poet, drummer, dancer, and teacher and an old friend of Sundari Devi, with whom he shares a *jāti* (loosely translated as "caste") affinity; Mukund is a Ghasi, Sundari a Lohara by birth. Village women of both their communities sing and dance collectively outdoors, sometimes with men, during

annual tree and fertility festivals. According to Mukund and Sundari, this is why a majority of nacnīs come from these two communities.

I had first met Sundari back in 1984, when she began to appear in all-night programs of Nagpuri songs, without dance, in villages and towns in the area. We were two of at most three women sitting among twenty-some male musicians on cramped, makeshift little stages. On stage, Sundari was clearly my superior, and she has always treated me as a younger sister, though I am older in years. Rumors of Sundari's other life as a dancer traveled everywhere with her, and so I was fascinated by her refusal to join me and another female singer when we occasionally danced women's jhumar (group song and dance) on stage. In fact, I did not see Sundari dance at all until our last interview session in 1993 and then again recently in 2007, when we finally danced women's jhumar together. She was the first woman I sought out when I began researching nacnīs in 1993, and she was one of the more difficult to find.

By the time Mukund Nayak and I located Sundari, we had already interviewed fourteen men and three other nacnīs, and together we had begun discussing several interpretive threads: the nacnī as Radha; the connection between music-making and romantic love among nacnīs and Jharkhandi musicians in general; the nacnī as an unusually empowered "super-woman"; and the grim, exploitive side of nacnī recruitment. These threads were to influence all of our conversations with Sundari to some extent.

She was in transition, having just settled with a new man, her fourth and, she hoped, her last ("until my teeth fall out," she said). This one was different from all the previous. Against all odds, she had successfully negotiated a proper, "social" (*samājik*) marriage for herself with a man of her own Lohara caste. She had stopped dancing all together, and her life as a nacnī was officially over, though she has continued to perform as a highly successful stage singer. She is still the only woman I know of who has left the "outside" social identity of nacnī and come back "inside," as she put it. In 1993, at her new husband's request, she was observing customs more associated with wives from castes of status and power, covering her head and eating only food cooked by herself or her co-wife.⁶ Mukund and I spent over a week's time in total with Sundari over the next two months, interviewing her in her new home (her husband's family home), at Mukund Nayak's urban home in Ranchi, at her sister's home, again at her new village home, at her birth home, and at a secluded mountainside nearby, where she finally sang and danced. When we first found her, she greeted us as old friends, posing with us for pictures in the courtyard of her new home as villagers gathered to watch. Once inside, she was eager to talk about both her new life and

the one she had just left behind, speaking to me in Hindi and to Mukund in Nagpuri, much of which I understood.⁷

Sundari: [To the author] I have now come into full society. We did a ceremony with *sindur* [vermillion, the mark of a married woman]. My husband's a very good man, important in the village. Now, going to programs isn't as it was. I cover my head, and I don't eat there.

Caroli: You haven't given up programs?

Sundari: [In hushed voice] I can't give up programs. How? I was flying in the air like a dry leaf and god put me down on earth. I decided that I wouldn't go with a man who wouldn't take food from my hand. Many have done mischief with me who wouldn't take food from me.

She had aged since I last saw her, acquiring a slightly weathered look in her face, but she was still attractive, vigorous, and charismatic with a broad, bold smile. She seemed to walk more proudly than I had remembered and beamed broadly as she showed us around her new home, including a second cooking fire made just for her. Her co-wife sulked quietly in the background.

I recorded nearly five hours of life history narratives from Sundari over those two months, though space permits only some exemplary highlights here. Throughout our interviews, our different expectations continually bumped up against one another. As we began, I hoped to hear an intimate and rich story of her life; Mukund was looking for accurate information, songs, and commentary about caste issues; Sundari, as it turned out, was scripting a media story.

Life as Performance

Sundari's Life Story

I began our first taped interview the same day we located her at her new village home with a simple request in Hindi to hear her life "history" (*itihās*). To my surprise, Mukund added, also in Hindi, that I was doing this research to give the "ruined" women *kalākār* (artists, musicians) of their castes the recognition and prestige they deserve. He followed with a whisper to me in English, which Sundari did not understand, "I don't want to use the word *n-a-c-n-i* just now, in this house." Sundari warned to his topic immediately, "Our art, our quality should stay in *our* society [caste]. People think this is dirty, so what should we do?"

Then, without announcement, Sundari launched into what folklore scholars call a "life story" (Titon 1980), a largely uninterrupted narrative of her life. She scripted this narrative in the presence of her new husband and parents-in-law, Mukund and myself. She spoke in Nagpuri,

often directly to Mukund, interspersed with the occasional English word (in quotes below), and she resisted interrupting her narrative with singing, even when Mukund requested it. It was only after she had finished, when she asked me in Hindi, "Then, will all the events and the story be published in the newspaper?" that we understood the strategy behind her selective, chronological account and the medium that shaped it.

Much later, I realized that Sundari's "newspaper" story traced the familiar outlines of many a women-centered folktale in northern India. Versions of this abjection-to-apotheosis narrative have been collected by Blackburn (2004:217–21), Gold (1994), Ramanujan (1991a:157–68, 1991b:35–42), and Trawick (1991). The narrative has also turned up in popular films, such as *Mother India* (Khan 1957) and *Bandit Queen* (Kapur 1994); in novels, such as C. B. Divakaruna's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997); and according to a friend, in tele-soaps such as *Chitthi* (Bhaskar 1999–2001). If I hadn't been thinking of Sundari and other *nacnis* as "courtesans," exceptional and marginal, I may have seen the connection between her narrative and village women's expressive culture much sooner. She talked about becoming a *nacni* through a process of abandonment and abjection, through no fault of her own:

I was young, then. [Rapidly] See my foolishness. I got married. We did only the *abūrat-bahūrat* ["coming" and "going" rituals] and only stayed for nine days. Yes, my husband was good. My husband was a servant in a Kol's [an indigenous group] house. He was an adult. [More rapidly] Then, he said to me, "What will this hen chaser do for me? What can she do for me?" What did he do? He took the Kol's daughter and went to Ranchi [snapping her fingers].

[Brief pause]

So I was small and slowly, slowly became an adult. So, [we said], "we'll live in uncle's house . . ." [leaving Sundari's father and his new second wife and children]. In that village there was a *rājā*, a Rajput. There were also *karam*, *jitiā*, and *ind-jātrā* [ritual-festivals, occasions for group dancing]. I was grazing goats and oxen in the forest and hills. My voice was good. [Whispering] The villagers were saying, "We'll make her a *nacni* . . ." [In normal voice] So, laughing and laughing, they sacrificed me like a cow, right? Someone gave me a drug in betel or something else, right? When I was going to a festival, right? Because of that, I was taking off all my clothes, except my petticoat and blouse. Only in my blouse and petticoat, I lived in the hills for two to four months. Like this, they made me crazy, and [softly] wherever the drum was being played, I was going in there. [Softer still] At that time, they caused me to dance as a *nacni*, yes they did. [In normal voice] Otherwise, Sundari would not have done that work by her own choice. Because my father would be disrespected, and my brother would be disrespected, too. A man getting me alone even for a short time did what he wanted. My maternal uncle cured my heart and mind back from that and did the outside-inside [a ritual to bring her back inside caste]. [Long silence]

That was about twenty years ago. I was about to be an adult. Now whenever that thought touches me, I get a peculiar smell. That means they have made my whole body bad. [Quietly] Now, too, I feel mentally dull, mentally out of order. [Long silence] . . .

Our society [caste] is the poorest, brother, really our society is the poorest. It's because my father and brother are not powerful. We were *seven* daughters of our father. There was one brother. So, [nobody asked] "where did which sister go?" . . . I say our society is foolish. Our society is poor. I will say only this. It's not my mistake. If my father and brother had been strong, then nobody could have made me a toy. Right? I blame my father and brother. I don't blame myself. [Silence]

As Sundari continued her story, she skipped over the next twenty years of her life, the time she had spent as a professional singer and dancer, a *nacni*. Even when Mukund prompted her to go back and fill in those years, she simply brushed him off. Instead, in keeping with the paradigmatic outlines of women-centered folk tales, she moved directly to her apotheosis as a heroine, self-made with a little help from above:

[Speaking softly] Even now, more girls would have been ruined, but there was D. N. Sinha, a Deputy Commissioner [D.C.] of Gumla, who saved the dignity of many girls. [In normal voice] Mostly, I have saved [them] all. Otherwise, even now, Sulocna-Phulocna [nacnis who became stage singers] and others of high quality, *all* would have been dancing. But I saved them . . . How did the D.C. Sahab come to appreciate me? For my quality . . .

I danced or sang in this world. Whatever there was to do, I did like a man. You all would have done nothing without me. Don't give me respect, you all live proudly. [Pause] I worked hard, whatever I did. Now you're all benefiting from that. I haven't profited. Mukund Nayak and Sundari Devi are not to be sold for money. We are not foolish artists. Otherwise, you two wouldn't have come here. We could have been thrown in a drain and sat there. That wasn't my vision. [Forcefully] Please, appreciate all my art, and I will give my art to you.

Appreciating the fact that she had avoided talking about her years as a dancer, I posed a more indirect question about women's solo public dancing. In response, Sundari alluded to that unspeakable time in her life, still in the context of her heroic journey and god-given internal power:

Carol: Why is dance left behind in stage singing? What harm is there in it? Sundari: There's no harm. But if there are a hundred men and only one lady, someone might say, "Oh, in such a flock of men, she has no shame, singing and dancing there." Some people might say that. But there's something special in that place—in her, too. Her body has some share of half-male. That's why she's between the men . . . No men do anything bad with her, but they ridicule her. What does that mean? I can't say. I don't think like that. But boldness! If you have boldness, you will go to the lion and face

it. I think, will the lions eat me? They will, but they can't eat what is inside . . . Did I lose anything? Some were kings, some were Rajputs, some were poor, some were emperors, but did anybody do any harm? Not so far. Then how shall I not become a lion? I saw all castes, and I stood up in my caste . . . Without a boat, I floated and crossed the Ganges . . . If you have no "power," you'll be left standing. If you're afraid of the water, then you can only go where god will give you *śakti* [female power emanating from Sival].

The metaphor of the lion (the vehicle of the god Siva's female aspect, Durga) came up again and again in Sundari's narratives; here it reflects back first the image of her exploiters and then her own image. The male lion is in stark contrast to her earlier image of her younger self, taken away as she innocently grazed animals to become a sacrificial cow herself. Just as Sundari moved across social boundaries in her life, she also blurred gender boundaries.

Sundari offered this interpretation of her life from her new position as a proper wife "inside" society. It was a safe place from which to speak about her abjection and restoration, but perhaps not safe enough to discuss the details of being a *nacni* or even to say the word in full voice. Was she influenced by Mukund's early reference to exploitation, by his very presence or that of her husband and in-laws and me, by the women-centered folktales that she had surely heard from women of many castes throughout her life, by an imagined image of herself in the newspaper? Certainly all of the above influenced her choices. She scripted this story, this truth of her life, for the general public. (Although, despite her instructions to us to "tell it all" and "use my name," I still wonder how much of this she would have liked to see in the newspaper.) After the taping, over rice-beer, she said, "Today, I've given you only the *motā-motā* [fat, big] matters of my life. When we meet again, I'll give the *patlā-patlā* [fine details]." I asked her if I could videotape her singing. She answered, "Yes, videotape everything. I will be Chotanagpur's biggest director. Shoot it all, and you'll have my story."

Life Revisited

Several weeks later, after speaking with Sundari in her sister's house, we met her again in her birth village, at the home of her father. Her mother, her mother's co-wife, and her father were all present. First we interviewed her parents, while Sundari enthusiastically directed them to confirm and retell the details of her own story of her childhood and fall from society, as if to underscore the veracity of her own account. Their account of her recruitment as a *nacni* was more detailed: before he left, they said, Sundari's first husband sold her to a land-owning Rajput for

400 rupees; he eventually handed her over to his brother-in-law, who trained her as a *nacnī*. When they had finished their account, Sundari sent them away, along with her husband and the villagers who had been listening. The three of us, Sundari, Mukund and I, huddled together in the dark, lowered our voices, and continued to talk with the tape recorder humming at our feet. Mukund and I were more directive in our questions, and we began to discuss women and dance, picking up where we had left the earlier interview. We all eventually used the word *nacnī*, first referring to them in the third person. Then Sundari began to speak about herself as a dancer in the present tense, not the past.

Sundari: If I'm in the *akbrā* [dancing arena], if I'm in the courtyard, if I'm in *karam* or *jitiā* [women's group dances], or if I'm on stage or in the jungle or in a crowd of thousands of people, I feel equal everywhere. I have no hesitation in my heart in any place. No concern. I am a lion . . . What good is there [in dance]? What shall I say? [Sighing] Like an airplane coming from Patna. It feels like that. Pride, pride. It feels like that.

Mukund mentioned *bhagwān* (god), and I took the opportunity to bring up the persona of Krishna, one of the interpretive threads that he and I had been discussing. Her response surprised us both:

Sundari: She [the *nacnī*] is married to *bhagwān*. That's tradition. She's not made from man, but from *bhagwān*.

Carol: Which *bhagwān*?

Sundari: Mahadev [Śiva].

Carol: Not Krishna?

Sundari: Radhas, they all feel that Krishna is god. Radha adorned herself before god Krishna, making herself special. [Pausing, thinking] Radha and Krishna were brother and sister, like Mukund and I . . . [softly, with hesitation] Radha was sexually neutral. They lived like this. You haven't heard this?

Mukund: Oh, sister, I haven't.

Carol: Wasn't she married?

Sundari: Her marriage was tradition. She had loved Krishna since childhood. He was the master of one thousand, eight hundred cowherd women, but he had the most love for Radha. Yes. Now in all Chotanagpur, people like Sundari in that same way. That Radha is me.

This Radha was not the erotic icon of Hindu Vaisnava devotional songs—and *nacnī* songs. Instead, Sundari had fashioned her as a devoted, asexual “sister” in her own new “social” image, and only then did she claim the likeness. Sundari became the mirror for Radha rather than the other way around, as it was with other *nacnīs*.

Sundari also represented certain details of her life differently in this more private conversation than she had in her initial, public life story, to

the consternation of both Mukund and I, who were still naively searching for the truth:

My brother-in-law, my sister's husband, was thinking about making me inside-caste [*jāti bhītar*] with a chicken sacrifice. I refused. Since I started dancing this tradition, what was the use? When he wanted to make me inside caste, all the villagers got together and said, “If you make her inside-caste, then we'll stop giving you any iron work.” Because of that, my brother-in-law supported them in making me a *nacnī*.

So, in this account, by her own choice and *self-sacrifice*, the restoration ritual of her more public story never actually happened.

Throughout our interviews, Sundari's interpretation of her life was an on-going process that could be likened to a series of improvised performances. She was responsive to her different audiences, to their interests and assumptions, and to our unfolding conversation, authoring herself through allusion to selected and fluid models and metaphors. For the general Indian public and her in-laws, she spoke of the social issues of caste and exploitation, the powerlessness of her caste, and her apotheosis and power as an artist. She modeled a new interpretation of female performers in Jharkhand as respectable, “social” women at the very moment of her own move back inside society. Both model and life empowered each other, a new metonymic pairing to replace that of the *nacnī*-Radha. In this later, more private interview, Sundari seemed to move the conversation outside society a bit, speaking more as a performer might with other performers. She spoke as a *nacnī* more directly, but still distanced herself and the *nacnī*'s alter-ego, Radha, from the discourse about sexual freedom that is so strongly associated with *nacnīs*. Folklorists have long appreciated the performative potential of personal narratives (Baumann 1977), but feminists and musicologists have often avoided undermining the factual authority of their sources by exposing their “fictional” or creative impulses. In the process, they deny us a real understanding of performers *as* performers.

The tale Sundari would tell today about this period in her life might well be different. In 1997, her “social” husband of only four years was murdered near their home, rumor has it out of jealousy. In 2001, she remarried, this time to a Muslim man who is a lover of Nagpuri music, the same man who had taken us to see her in her new home in 1993. She has converted to Islam, but continues to sing songs of Radha and Krishna and other Hindu deities in Jharkhand stage programs. “One is religion (*dharam*), the other is culture (*sanskriti*),” she said to me recently, “and the two are completely separate.” Today (January 2007), as I write this in Jharkhand, people talk about how she has become “more

Muslim" even than her newest husband, at least in her public comportment, and how she is not as open and free with other stage artists. When I spoke with her recently in his presence, she seemed careful, hesitant and deferential in choosing her words. Yet earlier, as we watched a stage troupe of young Nagpuri drummers and dancers practicing men's jhumar, she enthusiastically jhum-ed her way into a dramatic naci dance to show the young, middle-class city girls how it ought to be done. She is still selectively, performatively playing to—and with—her audiences. Remarkably, in her new model for modern female kalākārs as respectable stage singers *and* proper wives, she has also managed to make room for "social" re-marriage and religious conversion.

Performance as Life

By the evening of our last conversation at her parent's home on June 6, 1993, Mukund and I were resigned to Sundari's reluctance to sing, let alone dance, during our interviews. Mukund was especially frustrated that we had not yet seen the "real" Sundari, as he put it, the Sundari he had known for ten years. As it turned out, "Chotanagpur's biggest director" was simply waiting for the right circumstances. The following day, Sundari told us that she had contrived an excuse to send her new husband off to a market some miles away. Wearing a fine, flowered gold-colored sārī in the blazing hot sun, she led Mukund and me on a half-hour walk outside the village to a small mountain where she had played as a child. Once we were outside the village, away from family and society, Sundari sent back the kids who had been tagging along and then uncovered her head, marking the paradoxically secretive and open nature of the "outside." At the bottom of the mountain, she began to direct the videotaping as if she was following a script, or so it seemed to me. Eventually, however, the discourses of song and dance took priority, generating an energy that carried Sundari and Mukund in new, unplanned directions. I wrote later in my field notes, "Surrounded and secluded by that hill, Sundari was like an entirely different person than we'd seen during the last month or so."

She began by tracing the life of a proper "social" woman, once again chronologically, through a series of Nagpuri songs in the first person. For each of these first songs, she chose an appropriate spot, struck a pose, presented the song, then switched to Hindi to explain its meaning to me and video viewers in the song's female "voice," though whether it was Sundari's voice or not is left to the imagination. Each song was in one of the melody types of village women's group singing and dancing: women's jhumar or *damkac* (marriage songs). In other words, she

did not choose to sing naci songs of the men's jhumar repertory. Her audience was the general public, not just Mukund and me and her circle of performers. Each of her songs also alluded to secrets and sentiments hidden behind a woman's public face. In collective singing and dancing, such songs are not assumed to be the voice of any single woman. But here, in the context of Sundari's presentation of her life, I can't help but make the connection. In the passages that follow, I move between my observations as I watch the video now (*italics*) and my commentary as I recall and reflect on that afternoon (roman).

Sundari delivers her first song from the top of a tree, a carefree girl, swaying and snapping her fingers as she sings about village youth:

[Singing women's jhumar]

Refrain:

Oh, I saw walking along

Two dark young fellows,

I saw walking along.

Who are you, where are you going?

Verse:

I ask, but you don't speak

[Speaking] Weee-ho! I am like a fool.

Then she races, barefoot, to the top of the mountain, singing all the way (as she had done as a child, she said later) until she is far out of earshot. Returning to us at the base of the mountain, she strikes a contemplative pose sitting on a boulder with her head covered again by her sārī and sings as a young, single woman at home yearning for a secret love. As she sings, she stylistically mimes the song by resting her head in her band:

[Singing *damkac*, a marriage season folk song]

The forest catches fire, everybody looks

My heart is on fire, nobody sees.

My father abused me, my mother beat me,

My heart is on fire, my heart knows.

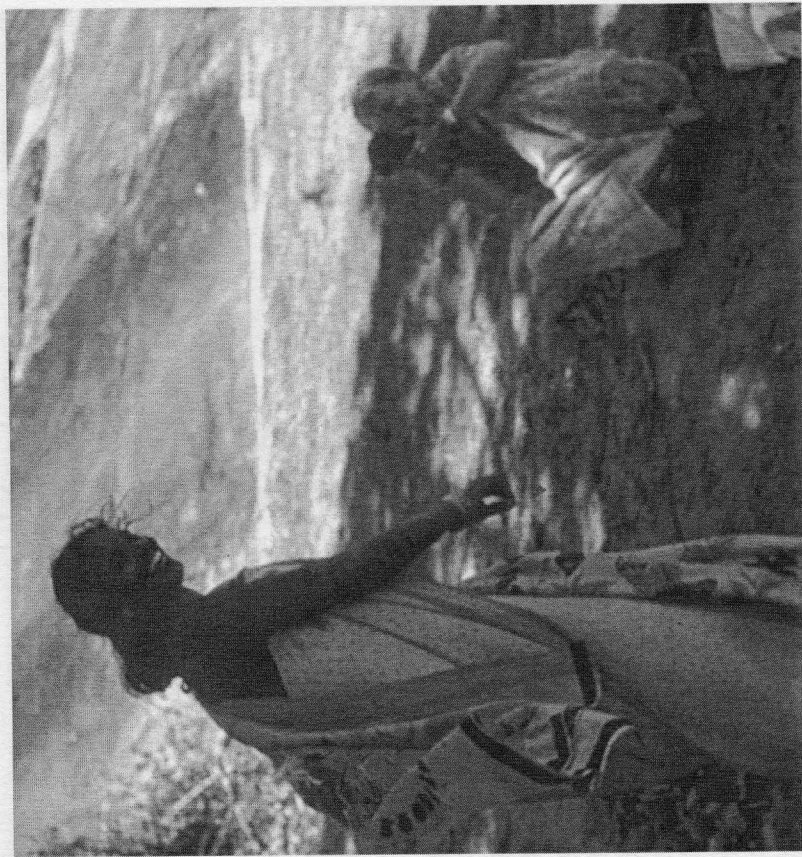
My mother abused me, my father beat me,

My heart is on fire, my beloved knows.

[Tunelessly speaking] Oh, my love isn't here. So how shall be know about my worries? OK, no matter.

Now, she becomes a wife biding secrets of love, sorrow, and happiness from her guests, whether secrets concerning her husband or another is unclear. Between verses she hesitantly dances a bit of women's jhumar, the gently swaying women's group dance, but she swings her arms freely as only naci do. Her sārī falls from her head (see Figure 1):

Figure 1. The author filming Sundari Devi as she sings and dances at the mountain, June 6, 1993. Photograph by Mukund Nayak.



[Singing women's *jhumar*]

Refrain:

Oh gold, oh love, go and bring beer,
Five guests have come to my house
Oh love, go and bring beer.

Verse:

Guests came, they spread a mat,
They kept asking about sorrow and happiness.

Verse:

Oh friend, what shall I say about you and me,
What kind of friendship did we make?

[Speaking] It is happiness. Some guests came to my house. So I asked my husband for rice-beer, sending him to get it.

As I recall that afternoon now, these first songs reminded me of Sundari's seated stage performances, but without the distorted amplification, I could actually hear the complex turns of her melody and the dusky roughness of her voice much better. These were good, full, uninterrupted songs that stayed within the lines, with no breaks from form in text, melody, or pose; no emergent violations of expectations; little animation (*jhum-ing*) in her voice or body while singing; and little rhythmic flow from one stanza to the next. When we watched the video afterwards, Mukund and I both found them lifeless and lacking spontaneity. To be fair, Sundari didn't have much of an audience to charm. More than once, she slipped out of character mid-song to complain, in Nagpuri, that she needed a drummer: "If the song's *tāl* [drumming pattern] isn't played, then the correct form can't come." As we watched the video later, Mukund and I exchanged a knowing look; these comments indirectly marked Sundari as a stage singer and a *nacnī*. When other Nagpuri village women sing and dance collectively, they have no need of a drummer; if one happens to be there, they can ignore him altogether and follow their own rhythm.

Then Mukund breaks Sundari's narrative flow, introducing a song of his own that invokes the image of Radha, but only by a reference in the text to Braj, where Radha played with and loved Krishna, and by the melody type. It is men's *jhumar* (*mārdanā jhumar*), a *nacnī* tune. Mukund begins singing in his research assistant stance, sitting in the shade of a tree, wearing his glasses, and reading the words from a copybook in his lap. This might have distanced him from Sundari, since she neither reads nor writes, but she clearly likes the song:

[Mukund, singing men's *jhumar*]

Verse 1:

In the evening, fair friend,
I went out to walk around in Braj village.

Refrain:

I saw an amazing woman walking around.
I cannot forget the quality of that woman, I cannot forget.

Sundari doesn't sing along, but she gradually moves into a gentle *nacnī* dance beside him, laughing and clapping as she sways, squats, stands, and turns, shifting her weight in one direction, sending her arms and eyes in the other. She directs her dance to him, not to the camera. With some encouragement from me, she finally cajoles a reluctant Mukund to put down his copy book and glasses, and to join her, dancing, turning, jumping, and jostling her as he continues to sing:

Verse 2:

*Combing and parting her hair,
With a flower in her sārī,*

Refrain:

*I saw an amazing woman walking around.
I cannot forget the quality of that woman, I cannot forget.*

When they finish, Mukund translates the song, and then Sundari says to me (and the camera) in Nagpuri: "In this song, someone is saying, 'Oh! The woman is so beautiful, her way of moving and her character and way of being provocative.' Yes, this is the thing, and if she would have been a woman like me, shameless, she would have run after him." She laughs and abruptly turns away.

This was the only naci song that either of them sang at the mountain. Sundari interpreted the ambiguous voice of the song as male, Krishna's or perhaps Mukund's, whose name, "Beautiful Flower," is an epithet of Krishna. The shadowy Radha of the song reflected back the unique image of Sundari dancing and joking with Mukund/Krishna. I've suggested elsewhere that her Nagpuri style of naci dance reconciles the distinctly gendered male and female styles of Nagpuri village group dance (Babiracki 2004). Sundari's commentary also shifted the stance of her previous songs. She spoke of herself here in the third person as an observed object of desire, a naci on stage, perhaps.

After the song, Sundari sits silently in thought for a long time. Then sitting—posing—she first explains, then sings a sober, subdued song about Mahadev (Siva). "There was a woman like me. She was a roṣik [artist] type . . . The woman went to roam around on the mountain, like me. It might be about now, and it might be the description of a former time."

[Singing women's jbumar]

Refrain:

*Oh, my Mahadev has spread his thick hair,
At the very top of the hill, someone is crying out.*

Verse:

*A Parvati [wife, fasting woman] worships.
She comes, thinking and understanding.*

[Speaking to Mukund, smiling broadly] "I climbed so high then, not without śaktī."

Mahadev is not only the deity of Sundari's birth family; according to her, he has also "walked all over" the mountain that she had just climbed. It's unclear exactly whose voice Sundari was claiming here, but I can appreciate the connection between this song and her earlier references

to the lion of Siva's female incarnation Durga; to śaktī, the female energy associated with Siva; and to Mahadev, not Krishna, as the source of her artistic quality. I still wonder if Sundari saw herself crying out at the top of the hill and/or as Parvati, the fasting, devoted "social" wife or perhaps as the "non-social" dancer from the night before who was blessed with the grace of her husband, Mahadev. Or was she all of them? Was she speaking for herself or observing herself or both? At that moment or in the past or both?

Later as we watched the videotape, Mukund expressed real frustration with Sundari at this point in the interview. He had tried to interest the dancer in her by offering up a naci song, and she had returned to this women's folk song about Mahadev instead. At the time, neither he nor I appreciated the narrative connection between the song and the mountain and her earlier narratives about śaktī, the lion, and dance.

"Sing about Radha and Krishna," Mukund says to Sundari in Nagpuri. She quietly searches her memory: "A song will come to my mind. It's a 'pure' Radha-Krishna song. It will come jangal-jhārā" [literally, "off the forest," according to season]. She tentatively starts a women's jbumar melody, but with a text that would work well as a men's jbumar naci song. Her choice leaves me confused.

[Sundari, singing women's jbumar]

Verse 1:

*In the Brinda forest karma [a tree and deity] is planted.
That day we found out.*

Refrain 1:

*With Radha and Lalita, Mohana [Krishna]
Plays [dances] day and night.*

She smiles and turns to Mukund, in Nagpuri: "Radha, Krishna, and Lalita will come. It won't be about only Radha and Krishna, huh? Lalita was also there." She's alluding to me, I suppose. Through the second verse and into the third, she sings quietly and keeps glancing at Mukund, who is sitting off camera to her right with his copybook and glasses:

Verse 2:

*Just as clouds fill the sky,
He fills the dance-line, Shyam [the Dark One, Krishna].*

Refrain 2:

*Dust flies, the sun looks dim.
He plays day and night.*

Verse 3:

*In the form of a magician,
With a shining cloth, Shyam,*

Then she stumbles on the third refrain and begins to repeat the second instead. "Dust flies, no!" she says. She tries again, "As many Krishnas, that many gopīs [coughing girls], no!" Mukund, still off camera, prompts her, "As many Radhas, that many Krishnas," just as Sundari recovers herself and sings, "As many gopīs, that many Krishnas." And with that, everything shifts in a remarkably intersubjective instant. I widen the camera frame as the two sing together, smiling at each other and laughing at their disagreement, but insisting on their own versions of the third refrain:

Verse 3:

In the form of a magician,
With a shining cloth, Shyam.

Sundari, refrain 3:

As many gopīs, that many Krishnas,
Mukund, refrain 3:

As many Radhas, that many Krishnas,
[He] plays day and night.

As they sing to one another their voices become as animated as their faces and bodies. Sundari's voice acquires the quality that Mukund calls "touching power," an accented lilt that only dancers have when they sing. Mukund begins clapping and reciting the *tāl* for her as she sits singing and *jhum-ting* (swaying to the song). He finally drops his copybook, leaps to his feet, grabs her hands, and dances around her as she falls to her back. He pulls her up, and they sing their respective versions of the third refrain together, holding hands, mirroring each other's steps, and then skipping around each other. It is not a *nacnī* dance, nor any other genre of village dance, but something of their own creation. At the end of the song, Mukund drags her to me and the camera, laughing, saying in Hindi, "She killed me," then in English, "She wants only *tāl*, you know. Then she'll kill everybody!"

Sundari's song, with its women's *jhumar* melody and men's *jhumar* text, puzzled me for a long time. As her strategy begins to sink in, though, I see it as a clever compromise between her "inside," family-oriented songs and the "outside" *nacnī* songs that Mukund was trying to persuade her to sing. First, the voice of the song observed Radha and Krishna in dance, and then Sundari observed herself in the song. In that transformative moment when Sundari and Mukund began singing to one another, I understood instantly that the two *kalākārs* had gone somewhere that Lalita, like Sundari's husband, could not follow, certainly not with a camera in her hand. Sundari's refusal to concede that single, insignificant word *gopīs* to the juridical power of Mukund and his "correct" text

was a playful, disruptive claim to interpretive power for its own sake. From this point on, Sundari left her chronological portrayal of a proper, *samājik* (social) village woman for good, and Mukund abandoned his mission to uncover the factual truth of Sundari's life. He said later that this was the "reality" of her life. There were no more songs of sacrificing wives or wife-goddesses. Sundari talked about the nature of her heart, what she regarded as her ideal relationship with a husband, and how female *kalākārs* (artists, musicians) are different than ordinary women. She not only left Parvati and *samājik* marriage behind, she recast herself as Krishna's consort, in effect becoming Radha to Mukund's Krishna. They both insisted later, and separately, that the two of them never had a romantic relationship with each other.

[Sundari, speaking in Hindi] This is the pure *līlā* [divine dance] of Radha and Krishna. [Pointing to herself and Mukund] It seems to me that his body becomes completely mixed with mine, and my body becomes mixed with his. [Both collapse in laughter, and I laugh from behind the camera.] . . . The pure song came out.

I venture to ask Sundari again about Radha's "sexual neutrality," and she firmly attributes her earlier interpretation to "rājās and Rājputs." Radha and Krishna were from the same caste, she says (contrary to most versions of the story that I have heard or read). Then she offers another story about how Krishna disguised himself as a female tattooer in order to recover his flute from Radha who had hidden it in her clothes. She illustrates the story by pressing a twig into the bold tattoos encircling her forearm. She turns to Mukund, "If you had said this to me, I would've come out." It seems that this Radha is a Lohara or Ghasi like Sundari and Mukund, not a high-caste Rājput. As Sundari goes on, even her allusion to Radha falls away:

[Speaking to Mukund, in Nagpurī] Like that, when I accept someone as my husband, I want to live like that [like Radha and Krishna]. Or not? If we shall keep our love, making ourselves like magnets, without concern for weather, fire, wind, and storm, and if we shall raise up our love like electricity and be connected like the wire of electricity [bringing her index fingers together], we shall gather and keep enough love. And if my husband makes any kind of mistake, then my heart breaks and our wire becomes disconnected [pulling her fingers apart]. My heart is of this type . . . [Turning to me, in Hindi] We people make a different type of love, or of talking. Other women are women, but we are not like that type of woman . . . I don't know about others, but I know my heart. As we decorate a song, as we bring *ras* [aesthetic "juice," sentiment], like that, we love [making an "OK" sign]. We have no shortage of heart. Let the soul fly in its own place. *Kalākārs* are *kalākārs*, we people . . . *Kalākārs*, our hearts, *kalākārs*, *kalākārs* are one. Our heart is one [raising her finger to the sky]. Boldness! . . . [To Mukund, in Nagpurī] When they [her

parents] come before me, then I say, "my mother, my father." Yes [nodding]. Like this, something in my heart says they've given me birth. But I have no need of them. If I will follow them, I won't be able to show in this world what is there in my heart.

Sundari ends the interview with a song and a dance in *nacnī* style, occasionally miming the words. It seems to be a simple, light-hearted women's song of friendship and diversion:

[Singing women's *jhumar*]

Verse 1:

Oh, such a sweet, fair woman
Why is your mind dull?

Refrain 1:

Life is only for four days,
Keep a loving heart for me.

[Sundari stops and squats close to Mukund, serious and insistent] *The matter is this, isn't it brother? The gods were also eager that we be born as Mukund and Sundari. Then we could do something. People are burning incense [to gods], but they are very eager to be human and to sit and chat like this. Their hearts must be crying. And that love and those people whom we've been born as here, will such come again in this world or not?*

I was absorbed with how joyful Sundari seemed and with what light abandon she sang and danced. Would Sundari have *kalākārs* the models for gods rather than vice versa? Mukund came away with an entirely different interpretation. He heard this last song as Sundari's lament for her lost life as a musician and dancer: "Really, she is not glad." This wasn't the first time I had heard this kind of judgment of Sundari. On our journey to find her, men at a tea stall vigorously debated whether her new social marriage would "ruin" her as a performer. But how could something this visceral and present be about a lost past? How could such capacity for delight ever be lost? As I listen to the song's third stanza, though, I can see his point. Sundari was not speaking as Radha, but as a married woman looking from the "inside" out at her former self.

Verse 3:

With Radha and Rukmini, he [Krishna] started *jhumar*.
I was unable to enjoy it.

Refrain 3:

He tasted me only for *sindur*
Keep a loving heart for me.

Sundari repeats the last line over and over as she pulls Mukund off the ground to dance *damkac* (a marriage dance) with her. Twice Mukund and I think she has finished and we begin talking, but each time

she picks up the refrain again, "Keep a loving heart for me." She doesn't want to let it go. When they finally separate, still laughing, Mukund says simply, "We died!" and Sundari signals with a wave of her hand at me that it is over.

We were quiet as we packed up and headed back to the village. When we got close, Sundari covered her head again with the end of her *sārī*.

Connecting Life, Performance, and Scholarship

Sundari's interpretive moves at the hill were more palpable—and less knowable—than those of her narratives. There were more discourses in play (narrative, poetry, melody, voice, movement), more models and metaphors, and thus more forms and meanings swirling around at the same time. Interpreting them years later has been like juggling memories and moments in time, with interpretations continually bumping up against one another. Her music and dance performances were cinematic, simultaneously about the past, present, and future. She had left her life as a performer to performance. Listening for life in these performances engaged a different process of interpretation for all three of us, I think. The aural and kinetic engagement of memory triggered by performance, especially dance, brought about sudden and unexpected interpretive shifts but also richer, more powerful interpretive experiences. As the interpretations shifted, so did their imagined audiences, from the general public, to fellow performers, to the knowing insiders of the *nacnī* tradition, to the two of them alone. Her performances, more than her narratives, confounded a sense of the "real," especially from the perspective of definitive biography. We can appreciate them more for her interpretive impulse and skill than as a source of information about her life. No wonder those who have studied the life histories of performers around the world have so seldom looked for life in the flow of their subjects' performances. Thinking back from Sundari's performances at the hill to her verbal narratives eventually helped me to approach the narratives as performance and to free them, too, from the pretense of "real life." Ironically, it was only then that I began to appreciate Sundari and others like her as unique, individual performers rather than as *nacnis*.

Sundari seemed to revel in the performative nature of interpretation. She didn't grasp her interpretive positions too tightly or take them too seriously. She traced familiar patterns lightly and slipped easily outside their edges. I'd like to think that we could learn something about interpretation from performers like Sundari that might benefit us in our own work. Interpretation informed by performance should be about more

than which models we choose. Whether we, researchers and performers alike, call upon ideological paradigms, religious icons, narrative motifs, melody-types, or dance patterns, the value of models, to my mind (and clearly Sundari's), lies in their capacity to shift in unexpected directions. Interpreting life history through dichotomies such as generic and particular or through fractured multiplicities is not our only option. Sundari not only blurred oppositional constructs—male/female, Radha/Parvati, outside/inside, past/present—but she made them ephemeral, like images mirrored in water. Similarly, interpretations have flowed in the course of my research on nācnīs like continuous, responsive, and improvisatory streams winding around and through each other; an endless interpretive dance.

We acknowledge that we arrive at our interpretations in the course of field research through complex, intersubjective and dialogic processes, but few of us manage to carry that insight through to our writing or our conclusions. (Exceptions include Hagedorn 2001 and Kisiuk 1998.) When we do, we run the risk of self-indulgence, of getting lost in ourselves rather than in the interpretive process. If we were as willing to tweak our interpretive templates as Sundari, we might find it easier to understand that intersubjectivity and make it more transparent. In the process, we might free our subjects from the constraints of our own thinking. As Sundari slipped in and out of her own models and metaphors, she slipped out of mine, too. Even from the distance of upstate New York, it has become awkward and uncomfortable to think of her as a courtesan, nācnī, prostitute, out-caste, untouchable, victim or “kept” woman. The power of such rigid, distancing models in Jharkhand itself have made it next to impossible for nācnīs to be accepted as modern performers. At the very least, we scholars needn't compound the problem.

Sundari's performative, interpretive moves define her “real” life. By trying to pin down the facts of her life for my own interpretive agenda, I might have failed to appreciate her creative capacity as an interpreter, and therefore failed to understand how she has managed to navigate the discourses about female performers in Jharkhand so brilliantly throughout her life, turning allusion, indirectness, and interpretation to her own discursive objectives. Perhaps the best way to understand her and other performers is not to lead them through interviews but to follow them through performances.

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Notes

1. Only a handful of scholars have interpreted the lives of professional female performers (including “courtesans”) in India through the methodology of oral life history narrative (see Maciejewski 2001a, 2001b, 2006; Babiracki 2005a; Qureshi 2001; Nanda 1990; Oldenburg 1990). Other studies have favored biography (Post 1992, 2000; Devi 1994), history and repertoire studies (Meduri 2001, 1996; Allen 1997; Neville 1996; Manuel 1989; Rao 1990), and socio-cultural studies (Qureshi 2006; Datar 1992; Wade and Pescatello 1979; Marglin 1985; Kersenboom-Stor 1987; Saeed 2001). The latter include numerous books that take courtesans primarily as prostitutes (e.g., Raghuramaiah 1991; Shankar 1990; Joadar 1985).
2. My 1993 research was funded by a senior research fellowship from the American Institute of Indian Studies.
3. My gratitude goes to Bhuvaneshwar Mahto, a talented Kurmali drummer and dance teacher, for this estimate as well as his assistance in researching nācnīs who perform in the eastern style.
4. I have found no reliable evidence of a devadāsī tradition in Jharkhand, even at the large Jagannath temple outside Ranchi. My best speculation is that nācnī dance developed from folk *raslīlā* performance and/or court dance (*darbārī jhumar*) and dancers (former devadāsīs) that were brought to what is now Jharkhand by rulers from Orissa.
5. The nācnī akhrā is a temporary structure constructed just outside a village specifically for their performances. My transliteration of the word akhrā (in Sanskrit, *akṣārā*) reflects Nagpuri pronunciation and standard transliteration as practiced in the Department of Tribal and Regional Languages of Ranchi University. See also Blain 1975, still the only reliable dictionary of the Nagpuri language. Throughout this article, I have transliterated words in a manner consistent with the language in which they are spoken.
6. Unofficial polygyny is common among Ghasis, Loharas, and other small artisan castes, as it used to be among Rajput groups.
7. Mukund and I, sometimes alone, sometimes together, have translated her words into English, adding yet another layer of interpretation to the others. My translation style allows some of the texture and thought patterns of her original statements to inflect the English (see Benjamin 1923:69–82) and bears the trace of Mukund's English speaking style.

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The Collision of Genres and Collusion of Participants: Marathi *Rāṣṭriya Kīrtan* and the Communication of Hindu Nationalism

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Wise people live for themselves, but mad people live for the nation. Wise people have written the history of the nation, but mad ones have created it. You should become mad along with them.

—Sanjiv Gogate, 2000

With these words, Sanjiv Gogate ended his virtuoso performance of *rāṣṭriya kīrtan*, a Hindu performance genre from Marathi-speaking western India that combines nationalist storytelling, songs of multiple genres, and religious discourse. His story—stocked with a standard repertoire of Hindu nationalist tropes—depicted a battle in which an impassioned 17th-century Hindu soldier fought and killed an elephant during a battle with a Muslim king. The soldier emerged bloody and half-dead, but victorious. Gogate invoked these violent images in 2000, at the height of Hindu nationalist hegemony in India and Maharashtra, while the Hindu nationalist Bhāratīya Janatā Party (Indian People's Party, hereafter as BJP) was India's ruling party, and while the nation's most unabashedly Hindu right-wing party, the Shiv Sena, controlled the Maharashtra state government. It was also six years after Bombay erupted in deadly riots following the destruction of a North Indian mosque, and just two years before inter-communal massacres in Gujarat state claimed thousands of lives.¹

In this paper, I address the creation of madness through multi-participant musical communication that Gogate alluded to in his final directive, and will use his *kīrtan* as my primary example. Gogate is a pseudonym that I use because of the sensitive nature of this topic and because the